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Busy shoppers should check price scanner receipts for errors

OLYMPIA – Holiday shoppers need to check their receipts, check them twice. They need to find out if the price scanner has been naughty or nice.

A pre-holiday price scanning accuracy survey by the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) found that three out of every 100 items they tested rang up incorrectly—sometimes in favor of businesses, but more often in favor of shoppers. This year's survey emphasized advertised and in-store special sales items. WSDA advises shoppers to check their receipts this holiday season and also urges businesses to tighten pricing practices.

The state teamed up with the cities of Seattle and Spokane to conduct scanner inspections in late November at retail stores where consumers typically do their holiday shopping. The inspectors checked 7,583 items at 91 stores. Thirteen percent of those stores failed, according to survey criteria. The inspections consisted of sampling 25 to 100 items from store shelves and racks. To pass the test, no more than 2 percent of the items sampled could ring up at higher than posted or advertised prices.

The survey found that advertised items and in-store specials were more likely to be mispriced than regular priced items. The inspectors found 175 of the advertised and specials in error while only 17 of the regularly priced items were incorrect.

"The stores that fail scanning inspections typically have problems with their pricing system or their employees need additional training," said Jerry Buendel, manager of the WSDA's Weights and Measures program. "These errors can cost consumers or businesses lots of money."

Weights and Measures officials are available to provide scanner training to stores on request.

"Ironically, the survey showed that consumers are more likely to be undercharged," Buendel noted.

Of the items checked, 1 percent were overcharges to the consumer with an average overcharge of \$6.01. The overcharges ranged from as little as 6 cents to \$12.50. However, inspectors found that 2 percent of the items were sold below the posted price. Consumers on average were undercharged \$14.89. The highest undercharge was at an electronics store where the price of a \$1,199 TV rang up at \$999, a \$200 difference.

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“Shoppers need to watch carefully. Even though you may benefit from an undercharge one time, an overcharge could strain your holiday budget,” Buendel said. “The hurt goes both ways. These errors impact a business’ bottom line especially when you consider the huge number of items sold during this busy season.”

Buendel offers the following shopping tips:

- Bring ads with you
- Write down prices and the posted discounts as you shop
- Watch the cash register display at the check-out counter
- Check your receipt before you leave the store
- Speak up when you see an error
- Resolve the problem before you leave the store

“If a scanning error isn’t fixed to your satisfaction, call your Weights and Measures official,” said Buendel. For scan price disputes in Seattle, call (206) 386-1296. In Spokane, call (509) 625-6611. For all other areas, call WSDA in Olympia at (360) 902-1857.

Officials conduct price verification inspections by following recommendations of the National Conference on Weights and Measures. Businesses failing a price verification inspection are subject to civil penalties of up to \$5,000 under state law and can be charged with a misdemeanor under city ordinances.

Weights and Measures officials work to ensure equity in the market place. Inspectors test weighing and measuring devices such as gas pumps, grocery store scales, truck scales and taxi meters. They inspect packaged, canned and bottled products to insure consumers are receiving the full measure stated on the package label. Officials are also charged with checking price scanners and verifying the quality of motor fuel.

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